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ABSTRACT

Counselors working with students from South Africa need to be aware that the system of apartheid has created separate and unequal societies resulting in major differences in student educational, cultural, political and other backgrounds. In addition, counselors need to be aware of individual differences as well as differences in how people cope with an oppressive system and adjust to a different culture. Because these differences may underlie problems in the counseling situation, they should be considered by program sponsors, foreign student advisors, academic advisors and college counsellors in dealing with student problems related to South Africa, and also in helping South African students realize their goals. Background factors from both black and white South African student perspectives which should be considered are defined and discussed. Crisis situations which affect South African students on college campuses are also identified. It is recommended that the information be used as a frame of reference in academic advisement, counseling and program management. (LPT)

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NAFSA FIELD SERVICE

WORKING PAPER # 2

Advising South African Students/Background/Current Crisis

Winnie D. Emoungu

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ADVISING SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS/ BACKGROUND/ CURRENT CRISIS

Paper presented at the Key Educational Systems Symposium
Sponsored by the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs
November 11, 1985

by

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INTRODUCTION

I want to acknowledge Mr. Barry Bem (Foreign Student Advisor, Howard University) who has been the motivating force behind my putting on paper ideas about South African students and their adjustment in the United States. I presented some ideas in this paper at a NAFSA sponsored workshop he coordinated in May 1985. The analysis I present is based on my professional and personal experiences, as well as on collaboration with him.*

During this discussion I will describe background factors that must be considered in working with South African students, be they black or white. I will focus on African students as blacks and later discuss white students. The system of apartheid has created separate and unequal societies from which these students come, and their experiences in the United States are colored by their backgrounds. It must be noted however, that South Africa has four racial groups, whites, coloreds (mixed race), Indians, and Africans with privileges in that descending order. The racial dynamics among these four groups are too complex for the scope of this presentation. For the purposes of our discussion, suffice it to say that these students come from different backgrounds, educationally, culturally, politically, etc.

BACKGROUND FACTORS

Academic

The South African system of education for blacks is not only rooted in the old British/European philosophy of education, but also in the belief of apartheid that blacks' cognitive functioning is significantly different from that of whites. It is a paternalistic system which determines what blacks can or cannot learn given their level of development, life style and position in society.

It makes an assertion that blacks cannot think in an abstract manner, but tend to be concrete in problem solving. Consequently, scientific subjects are either not taught in the schools or are given very little emphasis. Oftentimes, the laboratories are ill-equipped. Because of inadequate preparation, there tends to be a high rate of failure in scientific subjects at high school and university levels. This kind of preparation may frustrate a student's career objectives. The system is not designed to train blacks to be engineers, chemists, physicists.

*This paper represents the author's views and not necessarily those of the U.S. Information Agency or the U.S. Government.

The educational system emphasizes rote or the retentive approach to learning and not an analytical approach. Some students who may have received good grades in South Africa may experience initial difficulties with research papers and examinations that may call for comparative analysis of a specific topic.

The most common type of examination in South Africa is the essay type. A student may take some time to get used to objective questions which require discreet answers.

A student's transcript may show a number of C's, few B's, and fewer A's. In the American context this may be a bad transcript. In South Africa grading may be based on other factors such as conduct as well as on academic performance, and grades tend to be on the lower end of the scale. People involved in selection, admissions, and academic advisement should bear this in mind when evaluating a South African student's transcript.

There is no academic advisement at the high school level and limited advisement at the university level. Deciding on whether or not to attend college, which college to attend, or a major and career is an individual matter. Role models may influence selection of a major; there may be parental expectations; or simply pursuit of a major because of interesting subject matter. Given this background, it is important to refer a student for career counseling should he experience problems with his major. As a preventive measure, it would be to a student's advantage to recommend career counseling even before problems occurred. Since academic advisement is new to students, they may not take the initiative in seeking counseling and guidance. The advisor, therefore, may need to take a more active role in academic advisement. Another important element in academic advisement is the credit hour system, particularly because South African schools are not based on this system. This will need to be fully explained prior to the student's registration.

Since the introduction of Bantu Education, English standards have fallen. In this system, the pupil receives instruction in the mother tongue until sixth grade. Thereafter instruction may be in either English or Afrikaans. Switching to 100% English medium instruction may present problems in being able to communicate effectively in both writing and speaking. Unfamiliarity with American speech patterns and English may also present problems initially.

Libraries are often ill-equipped. A student may not even be accustomed to using the library. Good libraries are located in the cities. Information on their use is not disseminated to blacks who may not even be aware of their existence for the public. In some instances, when a black sees a library downtown, he may not be sure whether blacks are allowed to use it. There is always fear of going to public places and being told that you do not belong there.

Race relations leave much to be desired. The general belief is that whites oppress blacks and do not consider them to be capable individuals. Consequently, if a South African student receives a bad grade from a white instructor, it is likely that he may attribute this to racism. In such cases,

a student may fail to look at his own responsibility but may rationalize performance by referring to racial connotations of the situation. Additionally, in an integrated university a student may feel out of place. It may take some time before he develops a sense of belonging.

Coming from an oppressive system which always puts blacks down, a student may have self esteem problems, unsure whether he can make it in school. This anxiety is particularly crucial because it may affect initial academic performance. Close monitoring of students' academic performance, positive reinforcement for good grades, encouragement, and tutoring (when necessary) are strongly recommended. On the other hand, being disadvantaged tends to give South African blacks added motivation to succeed and prove themselves.

Socio-Political

Growing up under conditions of economic disadvantage may result in unfamiliarity with the banking system. A student may not have had the experience of using checks, and balancing his budget. Even if a black may have a checking account, merchants are generally reluctant to accept checks from blacks and demand cash transactions only. The areas of banking and money management are strongly recommended for orientation. This may help students manage their monthly allowances more effectively, and therefore prevent potential problems. When a student fails to balance his budget and owes the university money, he may be refused registration. Worse yet, the university may refuse to award his degree. Along the same lines of unfamiliarity, orientation must emphasize the need and use of health insurance and automobile insurance.

Society encourages looking up to authority to remove obstacles and make things possible. Whites fall in the category of authority who can do what blacks are prevented from doing by racial barriers. This expectation of authority figures may predispose a student to look up to his academic advisor, international student advisor and anybody in authority to solve his problems. When confronted with problems, he may not use his resources to arrive at solutions, but may present problems to be solved by people in authority. This, of course, shows itself as dependency in this society.

When a student arrives in the United States, he may begin to question some religious institutions. One finds that under the missionary influence, Christian faiths in South Africa emphasized the Puritan lifestyle. For instance, missionaries condemned dances, consumption of alcohol, public demonstration of affection as immoral. When a student sees Westerners behave in ways contrary to what he was taught, he may begin to doubt his religious practices. He, for instance, may decline invitations to go to church. Host families are usually very disappointed by such refusals.

South Africa's system of divide and rule may cause some students to be distrustful of each other, initially. The system not only emphasizes ethnicity, but rewards informers. Until a student gets to know fellow South African students, he may be reluctant to open up and discuss issues of common concern. He may even turn down invitations to talk about South Africa. Americans, eager to learn about conditions in South Africa, may not understand

why a student refuses to talk publicly about his home country. He may be fearful of consequences that may be far reaching, such as in employment when he returns to South Africa, or harassment of relatives while he is still in the United States. An extreme fear, but not irrational, may be the possibility that he may be arrested upon return. By virtue of travelling on a South African passport, a student may be accused by South African refugees of supporting the Government. Feeling ostracized by his countrymen, a student may tread very warily.

There is also a danger of perceiving whites in the United States the same way a black perceives South African whites. There may be displacement of anger in situations that would not normally call for that kind of response. Black Americans, as Westerners, may also be perceived as behaving like whites.

When a student experiences or observes racial discrimination, he may have a sense of disillusionment. The image of the United States as the number one country in race relations, the champion of rights for the disadvantaged, is shattered. A student's perceptions of whites may be reinforced.

Although this is not unique to South African blacks, some students express annoyance and disgust when Americans ask naive "Tarzan and Jane" type of questions. A student may react defensively, and want to talk about developed cities of Johannesburg, Capetown, Pretoria and Durban. He may, however, feel torn about this as these cities (by and large) represent white South Africa.

The question of native dress is also a disconcerting one. While during the missionary period, the black South African was taught that his native dress was inferior and distinguished heathens from Christians (who converted to Western dress), he now admires African students who have distinctive national attire. Sometimes, South African students may purchase African costumes they may not have had upon arrival in the United States. This revived pride in one's cultural heritage may extend to other areas such as music and art.

It is always disconcerting to be asked especially by African students from independent countries what you are doing to liberate South Africa. There is a sense of helplessness about not being able to change the complex South African problems. A student may find himself ignorant about events in the rest of Africa. This may not be a function of lack of interest, but that of the censoring of news in South Africa. These factors may affect how a student relates to other African students, and he may feel that he is not understood by his "African brothers and sisters."

Cultural

A student may perceive Americans as unfriendly because they value their privacy or personal space. He may want to reach out to neighbors but feel reluctant because of the perception that they tend to keep to themselves. He may see this also with classmates, passengers on public transportation, customers at restaurants, etc. Consequently, he may want to retreat rather than to reach out.

A student has to get used to calling before going to someone's house or scheduling an appointment to see an instructor. The pleasant surprise of dropping in on someone is not very well accepted in the United States. He may have to train himself to be on time for appointments and invitations as he becomes aware of the American value of time.

When growing up, one is taught that you do not talk back to your elders. Consequently, you tend not to argue with or challenge a person in authority. The student may perceive American students as aggressive, in their interactions with professors. It may take time for a student to talk freely in class. Where the grade depends on participation in class discussions, this adjustment is crucial.

It may also be surprising that some American students may relate on a first name basis with professors. It may seem that student-teacher interaction is that of equals, which is contrary to the formal, status-conscious student-teacher relationships in South Africa.

Verbal communication with authority figures may not be the only source of problems. Non-verbal communication such as maintaining eye contact may also be crucial. In the United States, if you do not maintain eye contact you may be considered timid or devious. In a counseling situation, a student may be thought of as avoiding something if he does not maintain eye contact.

Student-student relationships may also be considered competitive as individuals vie for straight A's, Deans's List, Honor Rolls, etc. Being accepted as a member of a discussion/study group depends on how much you can contribute to the group, not on what the group can do to help you.

Professional counseling is still considered taboo. Tradition is such that personal problems are not discussed with strangers. Relatives and friends form the supportive network which provides counseling. On the whole, international students tend not to use counseling services on campus. Without family and friends in the United States, to whom does a student turn? This is when the International Student Office can be of assistance by helping to strengthen supportive networks. It can also provide non-threatening counseling which takes into account cross-cultural nuances of problems.

So far I have described background factors that may assist you in understanding the unique problems that black students may have. To have a complete picture of South Africa, I will briefly review some background factors for the white South African student. I say briefly because having had the black experience in South Africa, I have limited shared experiences with the South African white.

White students I have met in the United States describe the adjustment they go through associating with blacks on an equal footing, an experience highly unlikely under apartheid. They must first overcome the color barrier and get to know people as individuals. Some report being met by hostile comments on apartheid, and being held responsible for what is going on in South Africa. The reaction here is two-fold, a student may plead ignorance of the effect of apartheid on blacks, or may be very defensive of the system that has taught

him a paternalistic attitude toward blacks. The socialization of white children into apartheid entails teaching them the stereotypes, portraying blacks as servants and laborers, and whites as the educated professional class. For a white student who went through such indoctrination, it would be difficult to relate to blacks and relate to them on an equal footing. Meeting blacks in the United States who do not meet the stereotype is a learning experience for a white student. We have seen white students who had to return to South Africa because they could not adjust culturally to the United States. In addition to culture shock, a white student may experience an emotional reaction to sharing a dormitory room with a black student.

A white student who condemns the apartheid system, and who has been involved in anti-apartheid activities, is least understood or accepted by most people. This student may feel the need to prove his convictions, and in the process has to deal with people who do not believe him, or those who stereotype him as racist.

There is also a student who maintains a low profile and does not want to be identified as South African white for fear of reactions stated above.

South African whites have better schools (curriculum, amenities, special enrichment programs) than blacks, and are better prepared to enter U.S. education than blacks.

The white world in South Africa is a western world, consequently it is equally baffling to a white student to be asked about lions and tigers living in backyards.

CURRENT CRISIS

The political turmoil in South Africa is well known to all of us - thanks to the media. Our concern is - how is it affecting South African students on our campuses? We see the impact in different ways:

Academic Performance

Students worry about their families in South Africa. This anxiety obviously affects one's ability to concentrate on studies. Grades begin to decline, resulting in a low Grade Point Average. School closings in South Africa may impact negatively on the academic preparation of new entrants. The number of days of school attendance is reduced and the atmosphere is not conducive to learning.

Emotional/Personal Reactions

The anxiety build-up may result in depression and even psychosomatic ailments. Under such circumstances it is not unusual to see a student withdraw and begin to lose interest in his surroundings; or he may suffer from headaches or ulcers. The worst experience is receiving news of death of loved ones. Such emotional factors may be intertwined with unsatisfactory academic performance.

Financial Problems

The dropping in value of the rand has meant very strict foreign currency controls. For students whose educational and living expenses are fully or partially paid by parents or South African sponsors, this is bad news. Most white students on Fulbright grants have partial scholarships, and will probably be affected by this more than black students, many of whom have full Fulbright grants. We are beginning to see requests for financial aid from students whose parents or sponsors can no longer send money to the United States. We have dealt with financial problems of those students whose scholarships have lapsed. These students may either wish to pursue further study or may be afraid of going home at this time.

With such financial problems, it is likely that a student's medical insurance will also lapse. Who will come to the student's aid in the event of a major illness?

Immigration

There may be an increase of students seeking political asylum in the United States. Students whose homes have been firebombed have very realistic concerns about returning to South Africa. Even those whose families have not suffered tragedies may share such concerns. Conditions are too unsettled, and some students may want to wait a little longer. A student whose visa has expired may remain at the original school, transfer to another school, work illegally, or may be arrested and deported.

We may also find students who cannot wait to complete their studies and return to take part in the social/political evolution in South Africa.

Black students from South African homelands feel shunted from pillar to post. They are issued travel documents instead of South African passports. Recent announcements about according citizenship to black South Africans have caused delays with renewal of expired documents. Students have been told that the Embassy is waiting for guidance from Pretoria about renewal of travel documents or issuance of South African passports. Without a valid travel document or passport, a student's immigration status is in limbo; and without a valid visa a student cannot hold part-time employment to meet his needs.

Group Conflict

The inter-group conflicts in South Africa may be played out among South African students in U.S. We may see disagreements about course of events and solutions, differences in perception of leaders and their political strategies. We may see more dissension between refugees and students planning to return to South Africa. Dissension may be a result of lack of trust and suspicion that the latter may be informers. Resentments between black and white students may be accentuated.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to define and clarify South African conditions under which students lived and studied. Although this presentation is problem oriented, it should be noted that not all South African students will present the full typology of problem areas. The information should be used as a frame of reference in academic advisement, counseling, and program management.

Although, a South African student may bring the "Academic, Socio-political and Cultural" baggage described here, there are individual differences, and also differences in how people cope with an oppressive system and adjusting to a different culture. This "baggage" may underlie problems in the counseling situation and cannot be ignored if we are to help a student realize his goal. Some of the problems may be age-related, pertaining more to younger undergraduate students coming directly from high school.

It is important to note that even though the white and black students come from different backgrounds, the most important similarity is learning to relate to others as individuals and not be influenced primarily by color.

As sponsors, admissions officers, foreign students advisers, academic advisers, college counselors, are we prepared to deal with student problems related to the South African crisis?